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# Libraries, Books, and Academic Freedom

by **S. David Mash** (Dean of Information Resources and Services, Graduate School (Resident Faculty), Columbia Biblical Seminary and School of Missions (Resident Faculty))



*"After school Pulcifer stopped at the library. There weren't too many books, because the audio-visual equipment took up so much room, but finally he found a book about a boy and his dog that he'd been wanting to read. When he went to the desk to check it out, the librarian said, 'It's very disappointing to see you taking out a book, Pulcifer, when you could be watching television. Do your parents know you come here to get books?' Pulcifer shook his head. 'I didn't think so. I don't think they would like to know that you were coming in here, getting books out, taking them home to read.' She frowned at Pulcifer. 'I remember one boy, Pulcifer, who started with just one book. Two months later he was checking out three books. Three, Pulcifer! The habit had formed. It was too late to help him.'"*<sup>1</sup>

The fictional Pulcifer attended school in the 1980s. Pulcifer's nonfiction cousins are now enrolled at **Eastern Michigan University** where, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, half the book collection has been put in a vault to make room for anything but books.<sup>2</sup> **Morrell D. Boone**, Dean of Learning Resources and Technology at **Eastern Michigan**, admits he has no idea how this arrangement has affected book circulation. But, he says, "I don't care [because] undergraduates do all their research online now."<sup>3</sup> eBook publisher **Susan Moldow** believes we are but five years away from a generation of young people who may never see a book.<sup>4</sup>

## The Death of the Book . . . Again

Thirty years ago cable television spelled the doom of libraries. Twenty years ago computers were going to make books obsolete. Ten years ago we were told printed materials would steadily decline.<sup>5</sup> Now at last, another decade later, the undergraduates at **Eastern Michigan University** are finally living the vision; they do all their research online. There is only one problem: it isn't true. In a letter to the editor of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, **Dr. Higbee** of the history department at **Eastern Michigan** wrote that **Boone's** claims that undergraduates do only online research is ludicrous.<sup>6</sup> **Higbee** versus **Boone** might pass as a parochial academic spat were it not emblematic of the broader confusion in American higher education over the place of the traditional library. This confusion is no parochial matter, for it blurs our minds to its corrosive effects on the scope of educational quality in our colleges and universities.

Why does this confusion over the place of the traditional library persist? Because influential and tenacious advocates for a book-free future continue to cast visions even in the face of decades of failed death-of-the-book prophecies. Even the formidable computer giant **Microsoft** claimed the death of the book three

years ago. But something unexpected happened on the way to the future. In July of 2001, *PC Magazine* bluntly stated this was bunk. One month later the *New York Times* reported that eBooks, in addition to not gathering dust, are also not gathering any readers. Less than three years after founding the ambitious **Frankfort eBook Awards**, **Microsoft** withdrew financing and discontinued the event. A glimpse at other recent mega-digitopian initiatives, such as the deceased **iPublish** project and the stunted **Questia e-library**, provide similar case studies.

Adding insult to injury, in August of 2002 *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported the results of an eBook study conducted with students at **Ball State University**. The study, supported by a \$20-million grant from the **Eli Lilly and Company Foundation**, found that college students are *not* yet willing to replace textbooks with eBooks.

## The Web We Weave

But won't the Web come to our rescue? Many students—and an increasing number of faculty and administrators—think of the Web as infinite as the universe and as bottomless as the proverbial pit. Yet it's not that simple. The Internet is a free-for-all haystack requiring no editorial oversight, no quality control, no integrity checks and no mooring to reality. With no quality control, the Web is as likely to cite information on breast cancer as it is on breasts, so to say. What you find there today may be gone tomorrow, and the owner leaves no forwarding address. **Anne Mintz**, Director of Knowledge Management at *Forbes* and award-winning information industry author, admits that "Web hoaxes, counterfeit sites and other spurious information on the Internet can give even the most discriminating of searchers a hard time."<sup>7</sup> Ditto that, **Barbara Quint**, Editor of *Searcher* magazine who warns that getting information off the Web may be as useless as getting it from a random telephone call. Add to that the essential reading for all researchers, the eye-opening book *Web of Deception, Misinformation on the Internet*, a veritable tome of Internet glitches and disinformation, and you have the makings of a disaster.

Even with educationally credible sites, a phenomenon known as "link rot" further complicates matters. The June 2002 issue of the *Journal of Science Education and Technology* reported the link-rot rate as a half-life of only 55 months. Imagine a library of useful materials mysteriously halving in size in just five years.<sup>8</sup>

It's no wonder that former *Wired* contributing writer **Paulina Borsook** believes a growing number of young people are deluded into thinking, "If it isn't on the Web, it isn't real." The upshot of this idea can turn out to be a life-or-

death matter. In the summer of 2002 a **Johns Hopkins** medical researcher discovered that a customary Internet search failed to uncover a deadly protocol available only through a thorough and calculated search.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these unruly realities, the Internet is an indispensable research tool. But the notion that it is sufficient as the tool of choice, or worse, the only really necessary tool for all or even most research tasks, is both completely up to date and thoroughly out of touch. How has this quixotic notion obtained such wide acceptance?

## Habits of Mind in an Entertainment Economy

The cardinal mantra of today's book-free advocates is that the current generation of students simply does not learn through books. Take, for instance, the **Des Moines Area Community College West Campus** where in place of a library, the school has a resource center furnished with Web-based computer workstations and eBooks and online journal access. The resource center houses no books. **Dr. Anthony Paustian**, executive dean of **West Campus**, defends the decision by arguing that young people grow up staring at computer screens.<sup>10</sup> Far be it for educators to inculcate anything as valuable as proper research skills.

Apparently, books and other paper media just aren't "arresting" enough for all these gamers-turned-college-students. A substantial body of literature indicates that the kind of learning proclaimed by the pundits is *not* what many students coming to our colleges and universities associate with the Internet.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps then, for twenty-first century students, we may need to reintroduce the learning styles that have stood the test of time. Isn't this what education is all about?

Can we cast aside linear habits of learning that 500 years of book reading has taught without consequence? Probably not. **Neil Postman** certainly doesn't think so: "A major new medium changes the structure of discourse; it does so by encouraging certain uses of the intellect."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps, we're throwing the baby out with the bath water, and many experts agree.

The Internet is championed as a nonlinear medium. But is nonlinear thinking all that it's cracked up to be? **David Rothenberg**, a professor of philosophy, thinks the Web invites a randomness of thought that leads to a weakness in logic and argument.<sup>13</sup> Pundit **Gertrude Himmelfarb** sees the Internet as contributing to our sound bite mentality and piecemeal creativity, especially in creative concerns. Unabomber victim and **Yale** computer science professor **David Gelernter** has expressed strong

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doubts about the Web. "Everyone knows what you do with the Web: You surf, sliding from site to site with the click of a mouse button. Exactly which problem will Web-surfing attack? ... [I]nsufficient shallowness? Excessive attention spans? Unhealthy fixation on in-depth analysis? Stubborn unwillingness to push on to the next topic until they have mastered the last?"<sup>14</sup>

In some instances nonlinear thinking is just newspeak for mental incoherence. But though nonlinear or lateral thinking is sometimes beneficial and even preferable, the devaluation of linear modes through the de-emphasis of print media is educationally regressive. The price of gamer-in-gamer-out educational strategy is mass intellectual insularity. **Thomas Mann** believes that making students comfortable with computers is not the same as making them comfortable with reading and analyzing text.<sup>15</sup> Social critic **David Shenk** cautions that "In our restless technological optimism, we tend to look down on old technologies as inferior. But we need to resist this. Traditional narrative offers the reader a journey with a built-in purpose; the progression of thought is specifically designed so that the reader may learn something, not just from parts of the story, but also from the story as a whole."<sup>16</sup>

Educators succumb to technological determinism when they place their faith in the dictum that since our students come to us with minds habituated to visual media, then educational processes should further harden the habit. It quickly follows that attempts to expand or deepen or mature their intellectual life beyond the tiny screen through extensive and intensive use of print media are off the mark. Such attempts, we are told, just don't adequately account for this generation's visual way of learning. While we are at it, let's design a nutrition program based on this generation's way of eating. And certainly the science of exercise physiology should be more attentive to the superiority of this generation's way of exercising.

But higher education isn't "higher" if it doesn't rise above the practice of tracing pre-existing ruts. Education is useless if all it does is inure us to our preconceived narrowness and myopia. Furthermore, programmatic demotion of linear media (especially books) strikes at a core value of the academy: academic freedom.

### The Depredation of Academic Freedom

No one could have imagined the context of today's academic libraries where the issue of academic freedom was forged. Yet, it is no less important today. The systematic de-emphasis of print media and the unique habits of mind it alone inculcates suppresses the spirit of inquiry because it *foreshortens* the horizon of ideas to which a student may be exposed and *narrows* the cognitive options for developing and exploring alternative ways

of thinking. Administrative decisions which misappropriate the role of books by marginalizing their presence deprive students of a means of inquiry and intellectual growth with attributes and effects all its own and necessary for the sustenance of a balanced and considered life of the mind. When substance is traded away for a popular perception of relevance, both substance and relevance are lost.

Moreover, since "freedom to learn" foreshadows the possibility of learning, the exile of material resources (books) with unique content found only offline is a depredation of academic freedom, an indirect and unintentional but potent act of censorship. Any academic process or administrative disposition which fails to account for the fact that an immeasurable flood of important scholarly and educational material continues to appear only in print resources is at best naïve, but the effect is far from benign: flashback to the **Johns Hopkins** tragedy. Librarians face the problems daily as we shift funds from one source to another, looking for ways to purchase materials. With online access, however, we further truncate the process by adding to the mix of materials, shelving the good side by side with the useless. **Paul Gilster**, author of the best selling books *The Internet Navigator* and *Finding It on the Internet* agrees: "When is a globe-spanning information network dangerous? When people make too many assumptions about what they find on it."<sup>17</sup>

How ironic that extensive research on the information habits of college students, published in 2002, reveals the brutal fact that traditional library resources continue to receive heavy use on American college and university campuses, even amidst some displacement of library use by use of the Internet in general. The research, conducted by Harris Interactive, was a blind study with 18-24 year old U.S. college students who use the Internet for course work. The sample was drawn from a pool of 7 million individuals, representative of all U.S. regions. The study found the majority of college students are ambivalent about paper versus electronic copies. A strong majority use the campus library Website for some of their assignments, while 20 percent use it for most assignments. Yet a strong 90 percent use the library for its print resources, including books, journals, articles and encyclopedias.<sup>18</sup>

### Conclusion

In *Fahrenheit 451*, firemen execute state censorship through the burning of books. A central character, Mr. Valery, observes that "The folly of mistaking a metaphor for a proof, a torrent of verbiage for a spring of capital truths ... is inborn in us."<sup>19</sup> The "information superhighway" metaphor (referring to the Internet), carried to the masses by years of torrential verbiage from influential and tenacious advocates for a book-free future, has attained the status of a proof. Merely invoking the phrase is to express a capital truth. But in our case firemen don't burn books; educators (and too shamefully often, some are librarians)

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# On Navigating Labyrinths and Webs: Print and the Internet as Institutions of Research

by **David D. Oberhelman** (Associate Professor, Humanities-Social Sciences Division, Oklahoma State University Library, 306 Edmon Low Library, Stillwater, OK 74078; Phone: 405-744-9773, 405-780-7260; Fax: 405-744-7579) <davido@okstate.edu>

I have decided to frame this reflection on the comparative value of the print world of books and journal articles, and the new world of Internet and pages on the World Wide Web as aids to research, around an account of a reference question I recently received from one of my colleagues at a small university. As the literature bibliographer at a large academic library, I am often called upon to assist my colleagues here as well as colleagues from other libraries with difficult questions in the Humanities that require rooting around in very obscure volumes. This reference librarian approached me with a request to locate a poem by the French writer **Pierre de Ronsard** about a fourteenth-century Albanian freedom fighter named **Gjergj Kastrioti** or **Scanderberg** (the spelling of this title varies widely). The patron who had asked the question could not recall where he had read about this poem, but remembered several sources saying that **Ronsard** had written about the Albanian. He and the librarian had used what resources they had available at a small academic library, so they forwarded the request on to me for further investigation using the resources of a larger institution. As I plunged into a morass of Renaissance French literary research in an attempt to uncover the elusive **Scanderberg** poem, I gained new insight into the differences between print and the Internet as information technologies, tools the scholar can manipulate to dig out the information they contain, but also as what I term institutions of research—tools that embody within them a set of rules and conventions governing how they are created, used and stand in relation to other types of information. I realized that researching this question in print and online had led me into two types of labyrinths in which the answer might be buried. In the process I concluded that the Internet, de-

spite the robust possibilities it opens up for the access and generation of knowledge, continues to have limitations for in-depth research because of its lack of classification and documentation, the two ingredients that make the print world a more solidly constructed and more navigable maze than the unstable “web” of cyberspace.

My first impulse was to turn to the complete editions of **Ronsard**'s works and the standard critical sources for the study of Renaissance poetry, the print sources that form the basis of traditional literary scholarship. After consulting various reference works about French literature and looking through the contents of **Ronsard**'s *Oeuvres* (using the “proper” editions listed in the critical sources), I was completely unable to find any mention of an Albanian warrior amidst his numerous odes and occasional poems about well-known French historical figures. I then delved deeper into the stacks to look through books of criticism about the poet and his period but still turned up no clues after consulting most of the traditional sources for **Ronsard** studies. My trek through the critical sources did give me some possible clues in the form of references to other essays and tomes, so I dutifully followed those paths even though they offered no insight. Indexes of the journal literature on **Ronsard** such as the *MLA Bibliography* and the *French XX Bibliography* also yielded no leads. There were ample references

articles to historical odes and poems about other unusual legendary figures such as Merlin, but **Scanderberg** was not mentioned and even the footnotes in the articles I read were silent. At this point I changed tactics and started looking for historical accounts of Albania hoping to find a thread to grasp. Using various catalogs such as **OCLC's WorldCat** and

other comprehensive sources for cataloging and classifying the book world, I found only one book-length study of **Scanderberg**'s life in English which luckily was in our local holdings. This book does list some artistic works inspired by the fighter such as a poem by **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow** (a piece that I easily found in his *Complete Works*), a brief account of his fortunes by **Montaigne**, and a number of operas written about him; but **Ronsard**'s name never appears.<sup>1</sup> My research using print sources proved fruitless, and I had reached a dead end. Nonetheless, I felt confident that the lack of any references to that **Scanderberg** poem in the well-researched books and articles I had consulted was a sign that the patron's claims that multiple sources discussed the poem had been in error. If there had been such a poem by **Ronsard**, I reasoned, there would have been some hints, some breadcrumbs sprinkled through the labyrinth of the printed word in the form of notes or bibliographic citations that would have pointed me in the right direction. The lack of evidence for a **Ronsard** poem thus became a reassurance because I was confident that all possible avenues of research using established book and journal sources had been exhausted.

Finally, with little hope for success, I turned to the labyrinth of the Web for answers using as a guide the search engine **Google**, the starting point for many research ventures nowadays among the undergraduate and even more advanced clients in my academic library. It was there that I stumbled upon the multiple sources the researcher had apparently used as his authority and also learned why the search had been so confusing for patron and librarian alike. After plugging in a search for “**Scanderberg**” (using several variant spellings) and “**Ronsard**,” I received about fifteen promising hits. Suddenly encouraged by the number of Web pages linking the two names, I pulled up a page entitled the “**Gjergj Kastrioti-Skenderberg**” from the domain “**Albanian.com**,” a commercial informational site about the history and culture of Albania.

As I skimmed the page, I discovered the sentence that inspired the patron's quest to find the poem: “**Skenderbeg**'s [sic] posthumous renown was by no means confined to his own country . . . . The sixteenth-century poet **Ronsard** wrote a poem about him and so did the nineteenth-century American poet **Longfellow**. **Antonio Vivaldi**, too, composed and opera entitled *Scanderbeg*.”<sup>2</sup> The passage gives no title for the poem and there was no documentation to help the reader locate the poem. There is a brief bibliography at the end of this biographical essay, but it consists of only

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banish them. The state does not destroy our books; the university disjoins them. We place them in vaults or we displace them with Web stations, television studios or other “media rich” diversions. Through these and other powerfully symbolic gestures, we say books are peripheral with less and less to offer our minds. But the scorn of books in the name of information access is Orwellian; it constricts access, constrains the mind and cheats our students.

In *The End of Education*, **Postman** argues

that “technology is here or will be; we must use it because it is there; we will become the kind of people the technology requires us to be; and, whether we like it or not, we will remake our institutions to accommodate the technology. All of this must happen because it is good for us, but in any case, we have no choice.”<sup>20</sup> We have become, in **Thoreau**'s words, the tools of our tools. But this is only because we act as if we do not have a choice. We do. If we want the book to have a future, we must not merely create one. We must also have the courage and take the time to guarantee it.

Endnotes